Effective Constituent Communication: The Keys to Fostering Public Engagement

Sean Dugan, Assistant Town Administrator, Easton
Jeremy Warnick, Director of Media Relations & Content Strategy, Cambridge

Communications in local government

Simply put, local government communicators provide information that is:

- Timely
- Accurate
- Complete

…so the public can make informed decisions about their community and daily life.

EVERYONE is on the marketing team

No matter what your role is in local government, you are representing the organization every day. Your words and actions translate to the public's perception of the organization.

How many times have you heard:

"I never heard anything about that project"

"I've sent 10 emails and never got a response"

"I got bounced around to 3 different departments and still didn't get an answer"

…we have the chance to make the public's experience working with us a positive one.

Communication is a key element to success in local government

- Public Engagement
- Transparency
- Crisis Management
- Short and Long-Term Planning
- Policy Implementation
- Internal Communication/Coordination

"The Right Message, to the Right People, at the Right Time"

Communication can't be overlooked anymore

The digital age has brought about a paradigm shift in the way citizens interact with municipalities, leading to:

- Powerful tools for residents to voice their opinions and connect with local governments
- An increased demand for transparent communication
- Two-way engagement
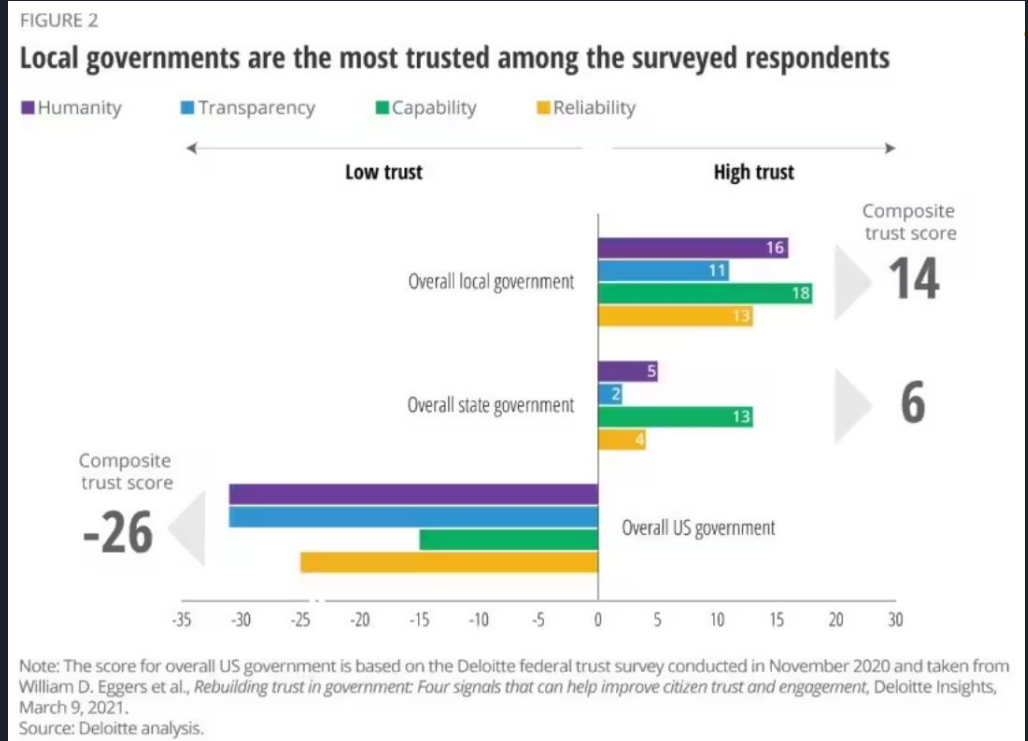- Citizen-centric platforms

Residents' expectations for engagement with their local governments have evolved significantly.

Trust, transparency and accountability

Distant government tends to be distrusted government.

People trust local government more than the feds and state gov - capitalize on that.

Information-sharing and engaging will build that trust.

FIGURE 2

Local governments are the most trusted among the surveyed respondents

■ Humanity   ■ Transparency   ■ Capability   ■ Reliability

← Low trust   High trust →

Composite trust score

Overall local government — 16 / 11 / 18 / 13 — **14**

Overall state government — 5 / 2 / 13 / 4 — **6**

Composite trust score **-26** — Overall US government

Note: The score for overall US government is based on the Deloitte federal trust survey conducted in November 2020 and taken from William D. Eggers et al., *Rebuilding trust in government: Four signals that can help improve citizen trust and engagement*, Deloitte Insights, March 9, 2021.
Source: Deloitte analysis.

Positive civic experience

Often times, digital is usually the first experience someone has with government.

Invest in good digital tools to make sure residents' experience is a positive one.

Your website should be primary source of information - if people can't find what they need, they will go elsewhere, or the rumor mill with take over.

Make updating your website a priority– it will save you time, energy, and resources in the long run.

Respond to questions or concerns on your social accounts – it's called social media for a reason.

It's easily forgotten, but our residents are our customers, and we should operate from the mindset that we owe it to them to be upfront about the work we do and should make it easy for them to do business with us.

What is public engagement?

Intentional - An active and intentional two-way dialogue between the public and governmental agencies, where the public has the opportunity to influence the decisions made by public-sector officials.

Inclusive - Government includes the public in the decision-making process.

Hint: Outreach is not engagement. Outreach is one-way communication, and doesn't collect feedback.

Spectrum of engagement

Requires judgement, and knowledge of your stakeholders and community.

▶ INCREASING IMPACT OR PERCEPTION OF IMPACT ON PUBLIC ▶

	INFORM & CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE
CONSIDER THIS OPTION WHEN …	Routine or fairly routine matter Time and/or budget constraints Clear legal process Manageable level of controversy Fairly simple set of interests Most issues have been heard, addressed through earlier processes Parties have tried but are unable to come to resolution	Active and mobilized groups with competing views Strong need for dialogue (not just input) Need for multiple types of input designed for different groups Fair amount of controversy Complex issues	Intense controversy, mobilized groups with competing views Need for education and buy-in by key constituencies Long-term, far-reaching effects Multiple jurisdictions Parties willing to meet, discuss (vs. referendum, court, etc.) Recommendation likely to be followed by decision makers
MAY NOT BE BEST OPTION WHEN …	Unclear or competing jurisdictions Policy matters with unclear effects Strong controversy or polarized parties Public input will have no effect Need for two-way dialogue	Intensive input will not satisfy need of public to influence the decision Time and/or budget constraints	Too expensive for amount of controversy No negotiating room Other groups or individuals may intercede to invalidate any forthcoming proposals Key parties unwilling to meet
POTENTIAL TOOLS & TECHNIQUES	Fact sheets - FAQs Public comment (via web, in writing, hearings) Newsletter Media releases and events Informal surveys Presentations to civic groups, B&Cs, HOAs, at Open Houses, etc.	Workshops, charrettes Stakeholder meetings Focus groups Techniques from Inform and Consult	Citizen advisory committee Participatory decision-making Consensus-building
CITIZEN ROLE	Citizen Role: Residents engage to be informed and to influence	Citizen Role: Residents engage to advocate and to help frame issues - Residents engage to understand technical issues and how to effectively advocate - Residents engage to help define problem and find solutions	Citizen Role: Residents are collaborators - Residents engage to identify different stakeholder interests - Residents engage to make informed decisions and forge effective compromises

Adapted from IAP2

Example of Inform and Consult

Annual hydrant flushing program:

Tools you may use:

- Announcement on website
- FAQ
- Post to social media
- Video explaining what it is and what it isn't

Example of Involve

Hiring a new Police Chief

Tools you may use:

- Details of recruitment process on website
- Public comment form
- Focus groups
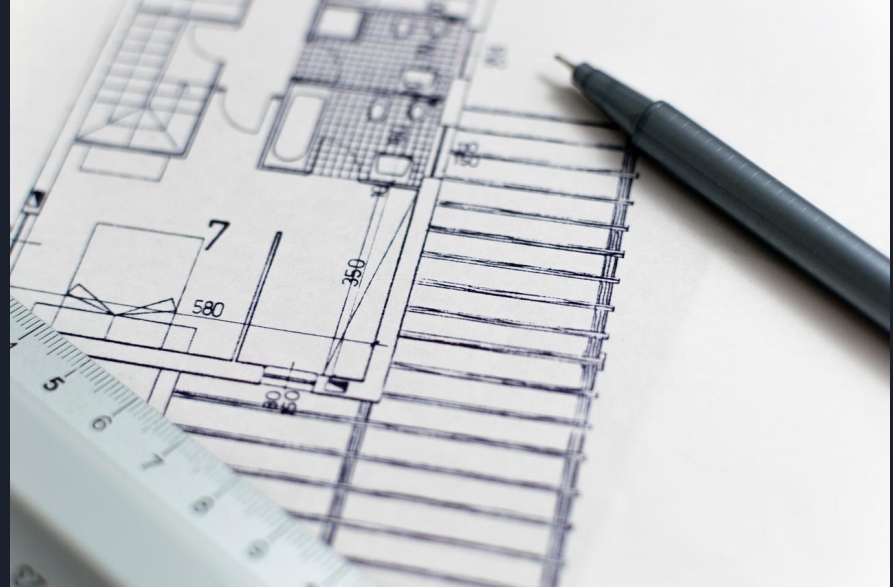- Get-to-know meetings and/or online Q&As with finalists

Example of Collaborate

Building a new high school

Tools you may use:

- School building committee
- Stakeholder meetings
- Comprehensive webpage or dedicated website
- Webinars
- Invitation to milestone events

Information consumption and sharing

Information consumption and sharing

Chris Maddern ✔
@chrismaddern

Follow

Didn't exist in 2006:

iPhone
iPad
Kindle
Uber
Airbnb
Android
Oculus
Spotify
Nest
Stripe
Square
Instagram
Slack
Spotify
Snapchat

RETWEETS 13,202   LIKES 19,621

9:37 PM - 19 Dec 2016 from Manhattan, NY

Print circulation of locally focused newspapers at its lowest since 2015

Print circulation of locally focused U.S. daily newspapers

— Print weekday (Mon-Fri) — Print Sunday

Newsroom employment at U.S. newspapers has plummeted since 2008 but grown at digital publishers

Number of U.S. newsroom employees by news industry, in thousands
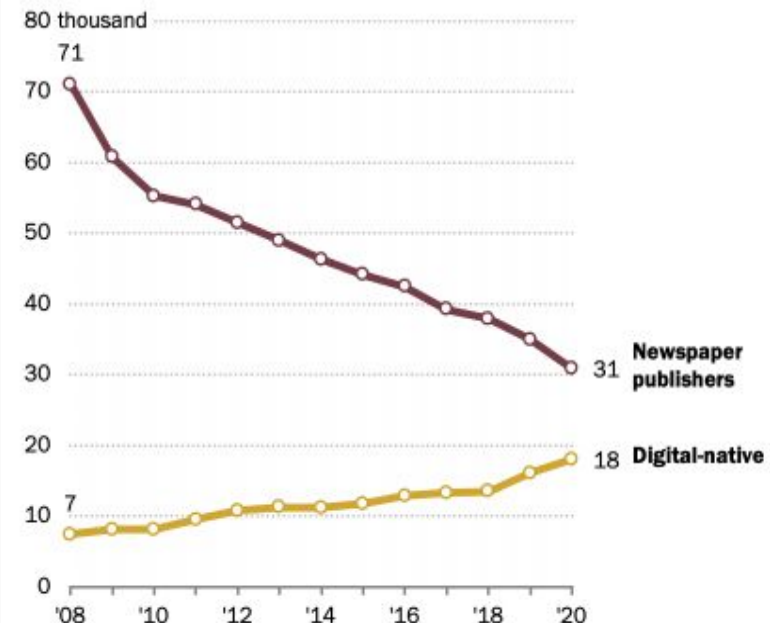
Social media sites as pathways to news

% of U.S. adults who ...
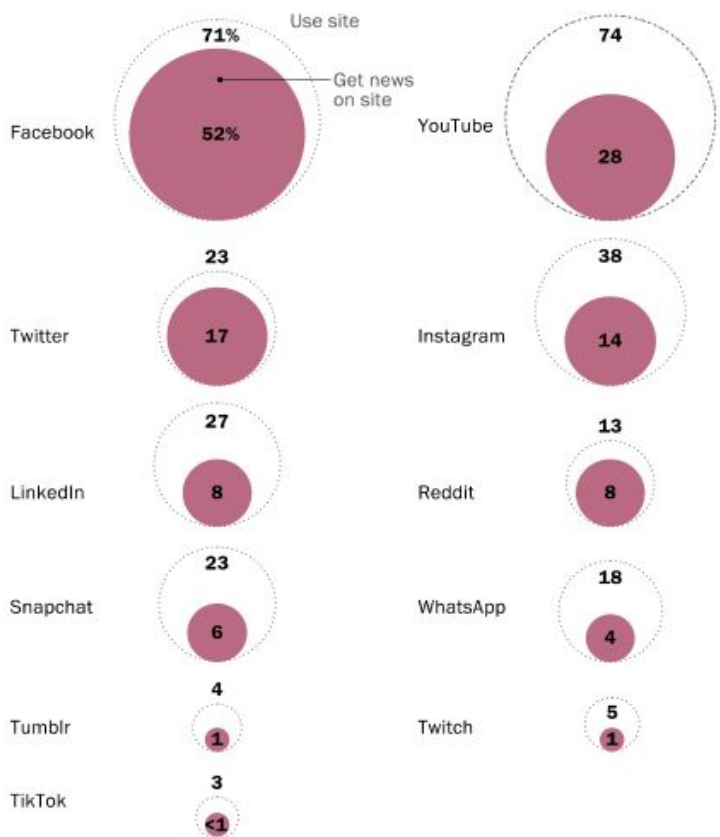
Use site

71%

Get news on site

Facebook 52%

Twitter 23 / 17

LinkedIn 27 / 8

Snapchat 23 / 6

Tumblr 4 / 1

TikTok 3 / <1

YouTube 74 / 28

Instagram 38 / 14

Reddit 13 / 8

WhatsApp 18 / 4

Twitch 5 / 1

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Online, most turn to news websites except for the youngest, who are more likely to use social media

*% of U.S. adults who get news **often** from ...*

- News websites or apps
- Search
- Social media
- Podcasts

Ages 18-29: 28% / 28% / 42% / 12%

30-49: 38 / 28 / 25 / 8

50-64: 33 / 22 / 15 / 4

65+: 32 / 15 / 10 / 3
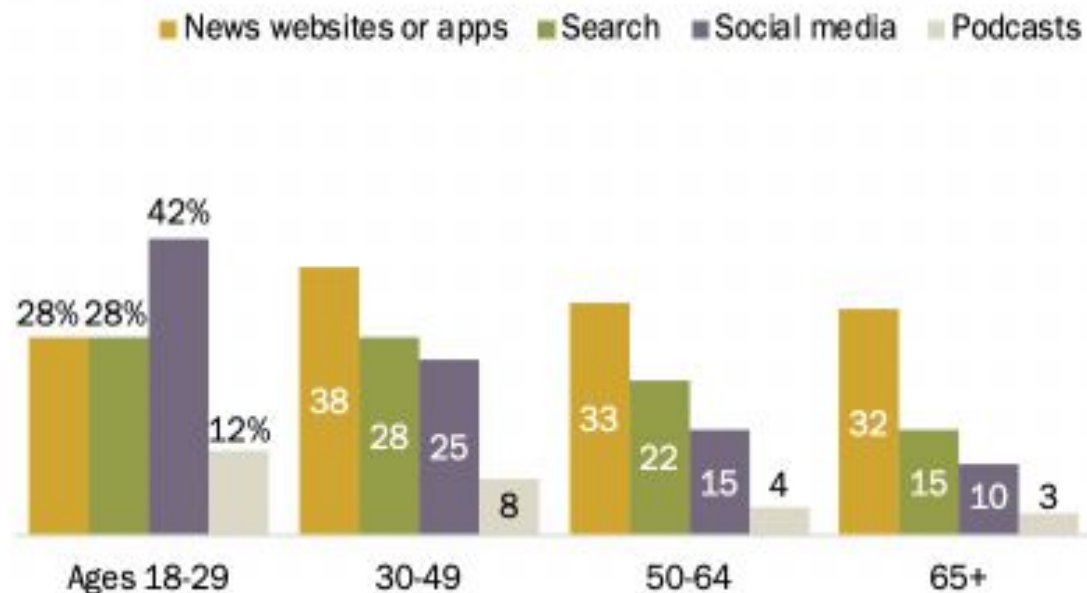
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Be your own newsroom

Know your audience

You know your community best

- Take the time to understand the segments of your community and how they consume their information.

If you don't know - conduct a survey - even if it's just a free online survey tool

- Have an idea of how your community gets news.

Reaching the right audience can be the difference between community support or not.

> "
>
> ANY INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE FOR YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE TO CONSUME IS CONTENT

ID what channels work in your community

Consistency - make sure you can keep feeding the beast.

Where do you get *most* of your information about Cambridge-related issues: [READ RESPONSES 01-08]

2020	PHONE	ONLINE
01. Television	7%	1%
02. Radio	3	1
03. Newspapers	9	4
04. City Newsletters or Daily Email Update	17	47
05. Social media sites	20	11
06. Meetings	---	1
07. Word of mouth	5	4
08. Websites	33	21
09. Next Door Platform	1	2
10. (Other)	1	1
11. (Don't know)	3	6

Friends of Medway, MA

Discussion   Featured   Members   Events   Media   Files

Tracy Garber
March 4 ·

Has anyone else had issues with accuracy of water meter reading? Our usage hasn't changed, if anything, we've been using less water throughout the winter. None of our toilets or faucets leak, and we turned off the supply to our outside spigots in late September or early October. I was shocked when opening this today. I'll call town hall on Monday, but before doing so, wondering if anyone else has a similar experience?

Editing to add: several people thoughtfully alerted me to a service I didn't know existed, which I will link here. After registering, noticed a significant anomaly that's recorded between December 14-16, a mysterious astronomical increase (16.7k gallons per hour, totaling 399,864 gallons over a 24 hour period) in water usage, that didn't actually occur to my knowledge. Had it been a leak, as some have suggested, it wouldn't have resolved on its own. I suggest registering for this service and reviewing your usage. I'd be interested to know if anyone else has had similar anomalies, and if so & willing, please share the date range. Hope we can get to the bottom of this issue. Thank you to all for chiming in!

https://www.townofmedway.org/.../webforms/aquahawk-alerting

Bill Number	Bill Date 02/28/2023	Customer Number	Account Number	DUE DATE 03/30/2023

DESCRIPTION	PREVIOUS READ DATE	CURRENT READ DATE	READ TYPE	CURRENT READ	PREVIOUS READ	USAGE	CURRENT CHARGE
WATER TRASH RES 1 FAMILY+	11/21/2022	02/22/2023	ACTUAL READ	66,321	60,223	6,098	$1,142.28 $93.75

Blend digital and non-digital communications to maximize reach

Not everyone is on digital. Make sure you integrate non-digital methods into your strategy.

Some common non-digital tools:

- Physical signage
- Phone calls
- Neighborhood meetings
- Door-to-door outreach
- Tax bill inserts
- Community partners

Not every piece of information can go out on every platform.

Use your judgement and knowledge of your community to determine when to use both digital and non-digital methods

Audit your communication channels and assets

Map out the digital/non digital channels available to you, including community partners, so when that important project comes up, you can more effectively plan your comms. Hint: Establish relationships with your community partners ahead of time!

If you have limited resources, what has the highest impact? Rather than spreading yourself thin when you can't adequately support it. Look at analytics–doesn't have to be a deep dive.

Key takeaways

If you aren't already, make sure any information your org is sending out to the public is also available and accessible on your website.

Through surveys, feedback, and review of analytics, determine which channels your community are most receptive to. Think of the highest impact channels and focus on them.

Public engagement is intentional and inclusive. Outreach ≠ engagement.

If you're not saying anything, you're saying something.

Questions?

Questions after the presentation? Email us:

Sean Dugan, sdugan@easton.ma.us

Jeremy Warnick, jwarnick@cambridgema.gov